

**INITIAL REPORT**

# Start Strong Council

December 2006



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## Executive Summary

December 2006

Early childhood experiences profoundly impact individuals' success in school and in life. In their first five years, children develop the foundation that will allow them to learn to read, to relate to and work well with others, and become critical thinkers. Building a strong foundation requires attention to all aspects of development, including physical, social and emotional, and cognitive, in addition to developing language skills and fostering a love of learning.

Recognizing the importance of the early childhood years to Virginia's families and its economy, Governor Tim Kaine appointed the Start Strong Council to guide the expansion of access to high quality preschool for Virginia's four-year-olds. In its first four months of work, the Council has examined research and best practices, and begun to develop a vision for Virginia's system of early childhood education.

Much of the evidence regarding the broad benefits of preschool originates in carefully designed studies of comprehensive, high-quality programs for low-income children. However, with the inception of voluntary universal preschool programs in several states, there is growing evidence that properly designed large-scale efforts can achieve comparable results for children from all income groups. Documented benefits include improved academic achievement throughout the educational system, from kindergarten readiness to college enrollment; reduced incidence of teen pregnancy; lower crime and delinquency; higher earnings and employment rates; and lower dependence on welfare and public health services.

There are additional benefits in terms of return on public investment. Skills gained by children in high-quality preschool programs can help schools achieve mandatory targets under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, reduce the costs of grade retention in elementary and secondary school, increase classroom productivity, and reduce the need for special education services. In the long run, the educational and workforce benefits lead to higher tax revenues and savings in safety-net programs. Federal Reserve Bank researchers have pegged the return on investment for a model preschool program at 16 percent annually, and a study of a different model program yielded an estimated return of \$7 for every \$1

invested. The Committee for Economic Development cites compelling evidence that access to high-quality preschool programs for all children, not only low-income children, is a cost-effective investment that pays dividends for years to come and will help ensure states' future economic productivity.

High quality preschool often is available for children from low-income families through subsidized programs, and for children from high-income families with the resources to pay tuition at top-notch centers. Many children from middle-income families lack access to quality programs because their parents cannot afford the fees. Many who are enrolled in preschool are not attending high-quality programs, and thus are missing out on the most effective school readiness preparation. The positive outcomes from investment in early childhood education are highly dependent on quality, as defined primarily by the effectiveness of teachers, how developmentally appropriate and comprehensive the approach is, and several structural features of programs such as group sizes.

There are lessons to be learned from the efforts of other countries, many of which are far ahead of the United States in the development of their early childhood programs, and from other states that have undertaken significant expansion of access to preschool. Many states have centralized planning and policy development for early childhood programs to build a coordinated infrastructure and ensure accountability, efficiency and effectiveness. Virginia has lacked a similar focus for its early childhood programs, and as a result the system is fragmented and inconsistent in quality. Promising efforts are underway to coordinate services, align expectations within and among programs for children from birth through kindergarten, and improve the quality of early care and education programs. The Alignment Project, the Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives, and Smart Beginnings are major initiatives to develop and implement a strategic policy agenda and establish the necessary infrastructure to support a comprehensive early childhood system. Building on these efforts, the Start Strong Council makes the following preliminary recommendations:

*1. Provide a coordinating infrastructure to address the research-based quality features that result in outcomes and gains for early learners.*

- A. Adopt a voluntary quality ratings system (QRS) that is consistent for both public and private preschool programs. Based on Alignment Project products, the QRS should address program quality standards, staff qualifications, classroom interactions, curriculum, physical environment, program management, mechanisms for quality assessment, monitoring, program evaluation, and reporting for all state-supported programs.
- B. Build a high quality preschool workforce by working with the Department of Education, Department of Social Services, community colleges, four-year colleges and other professional development providers to create appropriate education and training programs aligned with competencies, professional development lattice and licensure/certification requirements.

*2. Collect and use data and information to guide Start Strong decision-making.*

- A. Direct Governor's Working Group to collect and analyze retrospective data from local school divisions and private providers on outcomes from existing preschool programs. Data collection should include information about program characteristics, student characteristics, student achievement in preschool and student achievement in early elementary years. Support information systems to track data collection and reporting on programs, program quality, and outcomes prospectively.
- B. Consider the costs and benefits of commissioning a survey of a representative sample of families in Virginia to develop an accurate picture of the current placement of young children in care settings and the need for additional preschool services.

*3. Examine and strengthen existing programs as a foundation from which to build.*

- A. Identify all public funding streams supporting early childhood education and care, and training for providers (including scholarship programs). Recommend ways to improve utilization of existing funds in coordinated systems for delivery and tracking of direct services and professional development.

- B. Coordinate recruitment and registration policies and practices for existing public (and on a voluntary basis, private) preschool programs to facilitate greater integration and ensure that utilization of public dollars is maximized. For example, create a single point of entry for multiple preschool programs in a locality. Support local council capacity to facilitate collaboration.

*4. Identify or create governance structure at both the local and state levels.*

- A. Utilize the new Governor's Working Group as the central coordinating body for early childhood programs at the state level and encourage top-level participation from cabinet secretaries and agency heads. Provide funds and technical assistance to support the development of local planning councils mirroring the state-level working group. Develop grant process for local initiatives to apply for funding and specify what agencies or organizations might qualify as lead and/or fiscal agent at local level.
- B. Address in pilot programs the following: quality ratings system; blending of programs with different funding streams; delivery in mixed (public and private) sites; expansion of eligibility using various individual or community risk criteria; coordinating pre-K in schools and private sites with after-school care in private sites; course/program development, teacher training and ways to increase throughput, perhaps by partnering with private providers; funding for local councils to allocate within a range of specified priorities and quality requirements.

The Start Strong Council finds that increasing investment in early childhood education through expanded access to high quality preschool for four-year-olds holds the potential for desirable returns including greater school readiness, higher school achievement, and stronger employment opportunities, resulting in impressive benefits for the Commonwealth.

The Council and task forces will continue their work over the next year, providing a final report and recommendations to the Governor by October, 2007.

# Start Strong Council

December 2006

## INTRODUCTION

### Early learning experiences profoundly impact school and life success.

Experiences during the first five years of life can be a strong and sobering predictor of educational and vocational promise for an individual. During these years, the majority of the architecture of a child's brain is established,<sup>1</sup> profoundly impacting the capacity for that individual's development.

Successful learners develop in multi-faceted ways along a continuum. In the earliest years, "skill begets skill; ability begets ability,"<sup>2</sup> forming the platform for all future learning – the foundation that will allow young children to learn to read, relate to and work well with others, and become critical thinkers. In safe, nurturing, learning-rich environments where exploration and experimentation are encouraged and facilitated, children acquire the comprehensive skills they need to find footing on a strong path of school readiness. The absence of these supportive elements seriously hinders a child's healthy growth and development.

For children who have this foundation of readiness, the school years ahead and the trajectory of life attainment are promising. Yet in some communities in Virginia, as many as one in three children arrive at kindergarten already needing intervention.

## PALS

We are informed about the need for intervention through a state-provided, pre-literacy screening tool called PALS (Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening), which measures fundamentals of alphabet knowledge, letter sounds, and other early skills that form the basis for reading. Used by 98 percent of school districts on a voluntary basis, PALS-K is administered twice to children in public kindergarten – both at the beginning of the year and again in the spring. The PALS instrument not only assists the teacher in understanding the child's pre-reading abilities to help guide teaching, but also gives us a measure of children's pre-literacy skills both by locality and as a state average.

Grade-level reading can be a strong predictor of success in elementary school. A researcher at the University of Virginia found that the probability of overcoming a poor start in first grade and becoming at least an average reader by fourth grade was only .13, or about a 1 in 8 chance.<sup>3</sup>

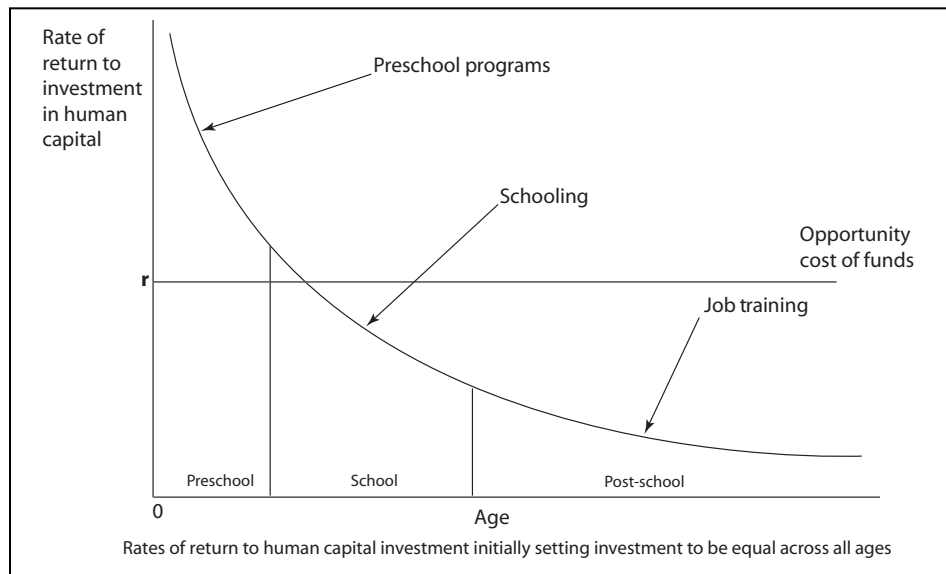
Ninety-five percent of children who pass the third grade reading test in Virginia are likely to pass the fifth grade reading test. Of those Virginia children who fail the third grade test, nearly half (44 percent)<sup>4</sup> are likely to also fail the fifth grade test, diminishing the promise of school success and later, the prospect of productive employment.

In 2005-06 in Virginia, nearly 9,000 children in kindergarten through third grade repeated a grade because of lack of readiness or other factors. The estimated state cost for retention in those grades for that year is \$44.1 million. State investment in the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), a program providing school readiness services to four-year-olds in primarily low-income families, was \$46.6 million that same year. In other words, Virginia spends \$5,700 per student per year on preschool and an average of \$8,900 per student for K-12. For nearly 9000 students, taxpayers spend twice that amount, or \$17,800, for students repeating a grade, instead of investing more broadly in prevention through quality pre-K. It is significant, however, that over the course of the years that VPI has increased in enrollment, retention rates have declined.

Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman states, "*Policies that seek to remedy deficits incurred in early years are much more costly than early investments wisely made, and do not restore lost capacities even when large costs are incurred. The later in life we attempt to repair early deficits, the costlier the remediation becomes.*"<sup>5</sup> This insight is illustrated in the following chart showing the highest rate of return on investment in human capital to be in the earliest years.<sup>6</sup>

A report from the Century Foundation this year includes this statement: "*The longer children progress in school without learning basic skills, the wider the achievement gap grows, and the less likely they will be to catch up with their peers.*"<sup>7</sup> This achievement gap can be viewed as a readiness gap – one that affects not only children from all regions and all socio-economic levels in terms of human development, but also the entire Commonwealth in terms of societal, workforce and economic implications. It is a gap that can be bridged, utilizing proven strategies.





Investment in optimal early care and education for the youngest of our citizens promises to yield a strong rate of return – the strongest of any other period in life. Economists show the potential for as much as a 16 percent annualized rate of return – four percent for the individual and 12 percent for society – on such investments.<sup>8</sup>

Virginia joins numerous states that have come to realize the opportunity at hand. In today's world, the global economy demands a strong, highly competitive workforce made up of individuals who achieve – those who have had the opportunity to build on a strong foundation of learning and development.

### **The Start Strong Council will recommend strategies for expanded access to preschool.**

Recognizing the benefits of high quality preschool experiences for Virginia's young children, Governor Tim Kaine appointed a 25-member Start Strong Council to explore optimal strategies to increase access to high quality learning environments for four-year-olds. Governor Kaine appointed Katherine Busser, Vice President of Capital One, as chair, and through Executive Order #7, the Governor gave the Council the following responsibilities:

1. Develop statewide goals and best practices for expanding opportunities for four-year-olds to access quality pre-kindergarten programs, and encourage communities to identify local strengths and challenges in reaching the statewide goals.
2. Oversee the development and implementation of guidelines for local Start Strong programs including, but not limited to, transportation arrangements and eligibility criteria for participating students, qualifications for

instructional personnel and administrators, inclusion of privately operated preschool programs, and policies for communication and cooperation with local Head Start and at-risk programs and local school boards.

3. Develop guidelines for the award of grants to local Start Strong councils.
4. Advise the Governor, the Secretary of Education, and the Secretary of Health and Human Resources on proposed policy and operational changes that facilitate interagency service development and implementation, communication and cooperation.
5. Identify and establish early childhood education goals for local Start Strong councils.
6. Recommend funding and strategies necessary to increase access to high quality preschool in the Commonwealth, in cooperation with local Start Strong councils.
7. Examine other issues as may seem appropriate.

The Council began its work in June, 2006. During a series of work sessions, the Council has learned about the importance of the first five years, comprehensive early childhood initiatives, the state of pre-kindergarten in the United States and other countries, the nature of high quality programs, Virginia's early childhood programs and activities, and models from other states. In addition to the 25 Council members, more than 75 citizens from across the Commonwealth and representing a diverse array of constituent groups participated in task forces focusing on specific aspects of a pre-kindergarten initiative. During discussions, the Council began to formulate a vision for Virginia's preschool system. This report summarizes the preliminary findings and recommendations of the Council.

## BACKGROUND ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

### Children develop across five domains of growth.

Early childhood development involves integrated growth across five domains of development:

- Physical and motor
- Social-emotional
- Language and literacy
- Cognitive and general knowledge
- Approaches toward learning

Development in one domain influences – and is influenced by – growth in all areas. In preschool years, learning happens most effectively through play-based, developmentally appropriate activities of exploration and experimentation.

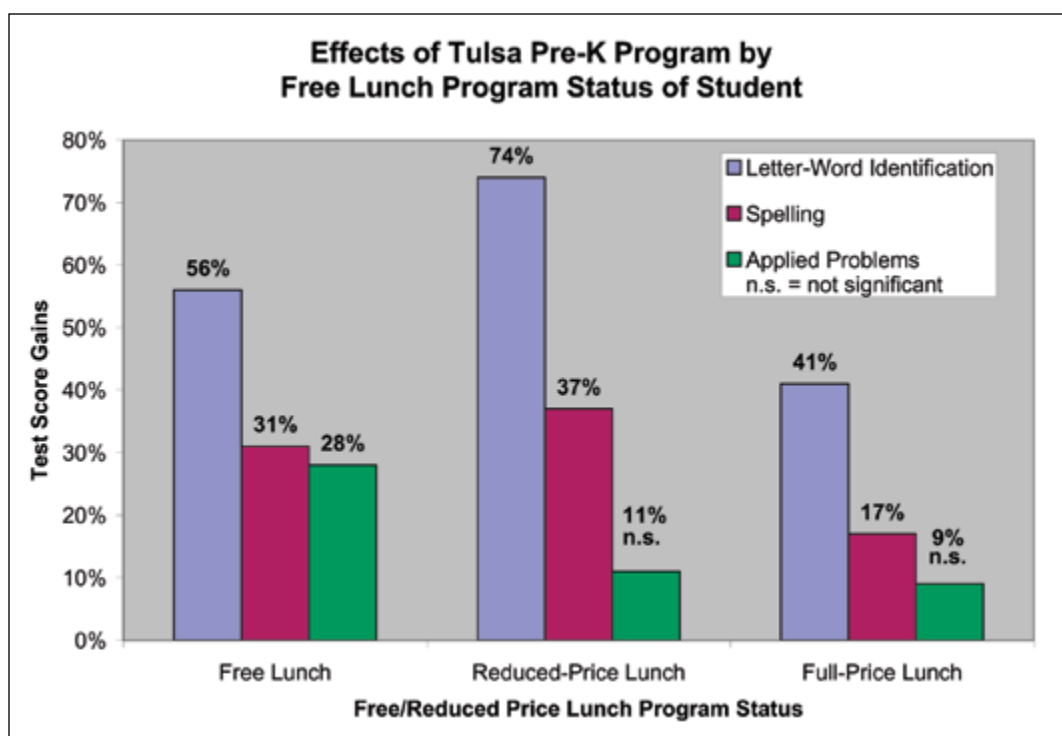
Children who have access to high-quality preschool learning environments (ones that support this rich, comprehensive growth and development across domains) tend to arrive at kindergarten with the range of skills and abilities needed to learn to read and to navigate successfully the kindergarten learning environment. Children who have had the benefit of interactions with adults (including parents, grandparents, neighbors, pediatricians, child care providers and/or preschool teachers) supportive of their comprehensive growth and development begin school with an advantage. These are the students who are more likely to achieve at a level that puts them on a path of success.

### Research studies inform our knowledge about outcomes for children and society.

Carefully-designed, closely-managed longitudinal studies have documented lasting benefits from high-quality pre-kindergarten programs among children at-risk of school failure. One might assume that these results would be difficult to replicate at scale, or that benefits accrue only to the most highly at risk students. But a rigorous study of Oklahoma's universal high quality preschool program, serving 65 percent of that state's four-year-olds and **not targeted solely to at-risk students**, finds *"impact on achievement at kindergarten entry that is quite comparable to Perry Preschool program effects [detailed on following pages] in the early elementary years."*<sup>9</sup> Findings from Oklahoma's program are illustrated in the chart below.<sup>10</sup> These outcomes behoove states to design and offer high quality programs that can deliver exceptional returns for all children.

Three highly acclaimed studies are frequently referenced as the foundation for further inquiry regarding outcomes from high quality early childhood programs: the Abecedarian project, the High/Scope Perry Preschool initiative, and a study of the Child Parent Centers in Chicago.

The Abecedarian project, initiated in 1972 in North Carolina, studied the potential benefits of early childhood education for a group of children from low-income families. These children received high-quality, full-time, year-round care and education in a child care setting from infancy through age five. The program





featured a curriculum that addressed cognitive, social and emotional, and linguistic development, teachers with bachelor's degrees, and a low child-to-teacher-ratios. A control group not receiving the Abecedarian intervention also was tracked as part of the study.

The Abecedarian project is especially valuable because of the longitudinal outcome data it has provided. Progress of the participating children was tracked over two decades, with studies conducted at ages 12, 15, and 21. Important, long-lasting benefits in scholastic success and educational attainment were associated with the early childhood program.

Compared to the control group, children who participated in the program exhibited the following:

- Higher cognitive test scores from the toddler years to age 21
- Higher academic achievement in both reading and math from the primary grades through young adulthood
- More years of education and more likelihood of attending a four-year college
- Higher average age of parents when first child was born.

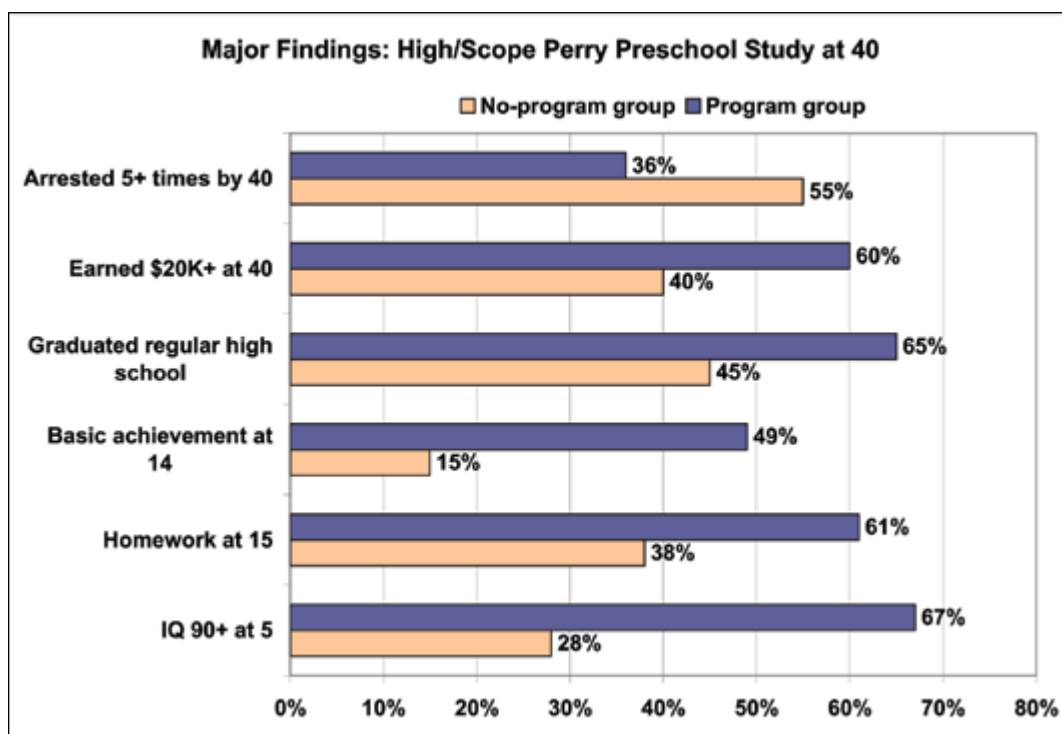
There was an additional noted benefit to the Abecedarian experience. Mothers whose children participated in the program, especially teen mothers, achieved higher educational and employment status than mothers whose children were not in the program.<sup>11</sup>

*The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study*, conducted from 1962-1967 in Ypsilanti, Michigan, provided a program of low ratios, certified teachers, and specific curricula to at-risk children. Data was collected annually for these children at ages three through 11, and then at ages 14, 15, 19, 27, and 40. Results from the intervention are highlighted in the chart below.<sup>12</sup>

The *Chicago Longitudinal Study* has followed participating children for 21 years. In the original study, beginning in 1967, low-income children aged three to nine were provided with comprehensive educational and family support services. The program focused on developing skills in reading, math and communication.

The study found that relative to the comparison group, participants had a 29 percent higher rate of high school completion, 33 percent lower rate of juvenile arrest, 42 percent reduction in arrest for violent offense, 41 percent reduction in special education, 40 percent reduction in grade repetition, and 51 percent reduction in child maltreatment.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to documenting higher cognitive and academic achievement, studies of high quality early childhood education also show outcomes related to reduced crime and increased healthy behaviors. For example, the Abecedarian participants were less likely to become teen parents (26 percent) than their peers who did not attend pre-kindergarten (45 percent).<sup>14</sup> The Chicago Longitudinal study showed that children who did not participate in preschool were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18 than their peers who had been participants in the program.<sup>15</sup>



### Children from all socio-economic levels benefit from pre-kindergarten experiences.

In fact, nationally, nearly half (49 percent) of preschoolers who enter kindergarten without the ability to recognize the letters of the alphabet are middle to higher income. A grade is repeated by 12 percent of middle-income children; 11 percent of middle-income students drop out of high school. The readiness gap between middle- and upper-income children is greater than the gap between middle- and low-income students.<sup>16</sup> The need for good preparation through quality preschool extends far beyond low-income circles.

Reported in the 2000 *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, a survey of 3,500 kindergarten teachers from across the country yielded important data. Almost half (46 percent) of the teachers reported that at least half of their students had difficulty following directions; 36 percent reported that at least half of the students lacked needed academic skills; and another third (34 percent) indicated that at least half of their class had difficulty working independently. Seventy-eight to 93 percent of these teachers reported that children with a preschool experience were more likely to count, recognize letters of the alphabet, have problem-solving skills, follow directions, get along with others, show sensitivity to the feelings of others, and were less likely to disrupt class.<sup>17</sup>

Many middle income children lack access to preschool because they are not eligible for income-based programs, yet their families are not able to afford a high quality preschool. Enrollment for a four-year old in a center-based early childhood program can be more expensive than attendance at a college or university. The high cost of care borne by parents of young children is exacerbated by the fact that typically these parents are early in their earnings trajectory; by the time their children have reached college age, parents are more likely to have higher earnings and to have set aside savings for college.

For those children who are enrolled in preschool, many are not attending a high-quality program and are therefore missing out on the most effective school readiness preparation.

*It is important to note that use of the term “universal” does not imply mandatory attendance. The term simply refers to the goal that preschool will be available to all four-year-old children whose parents wish them to attend.*

### Cost Savings to K-12 School System

Belfield describes short-term benefits accruing to the child: enhanced educational achievement, improved health benefits, and increased well-being with less abuse. Short-term benefits to the family of a universal preschool program include free child care time while working, and benefits to society/economy result from tax revenues from working parents. The mid-term benefits are due to greater school system efficiency through reduced retention, special education, and increased productivity; as well as reduced abuse/neglect and lower reliance on public healthcare. The long-term benefits for the child include higher likelihood of high school graduation and enrollment in higher education; greater employment opportunities and higher pay; lower teen pregnancy; and reduced delinquency. Society and the economy will see longterm benefits in lower welfare dependence, increased income tax revenues, and reduced crime.

## The return on investment is demonstrated in a variety of ways.

A solid body of research documents the outcomes correlated with high quality early learning experiences.

### School Readiness: Impact on the K-12 School System.

Through *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)*, schools must show yearly progress so that by 2014, all children are achieving at a “proficient” level. The school readiness skills gained by children in a high quality pre-kindergarten program can help schools achieve these measures.

In a study of New York’s early childhood education system, Clive Belfield, a researcher at Teachers College, Columbia University, found that high quality preschool reduces costs of retention (grade repetition) in the K-12 school system, reduces the incidence and therefore cost of special education, and increases classroom productivity. *“Using conservative assumptions and data from high-quality published studies, we estimate present value cost-savings ranging from \$2,591-\$9,547 per child participating in the program,”* Belfield reports.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, a recent study in Maryland showed that fifth graders who had attended preschool were 44 percent less likely to have repeated a grade than their peers who did not participate in a preschool program.<sup>19</sup>

### School Readiness: Economic and Workforce Implications.

Other outcomes realized from the landmark studies impact the workforce and economy. For example, the Perry study found that as forty-year-old adults, participants were more likely to be employed and to have a 33 percent higher average income than their peers who did not have preschool experience.<sup>20</sup> The economy benefits as these children grow up and become net economic and social contributors to society.

One cost-benefit analysis of the Chicago study indicates that with an average cost of \$6,730 (1998 dollars) per child for 1.5 years of participation, the preschool program generated a total return to society of \$47,759 per participant. Largest categories of public benefit include higher earnings capacity (28 percent), criminal justice system savings (28 percent), tangible cost savings for crime victims (24 percent) and school remediation savings (18 percent). Ultimately, the cost-benefit analysis identified a \$7.10 return to society for every dollar invested in preschool.<sup>21</sup>

Based on the longitudinal studies, Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, researchers and economic analysts at the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank, calculated the cost/benefits of the Perry program.

*“To calculate the internal rate of return for the Perry School program, we estimated the time periods in which costs and benefits in constant dollars were paid or received by program participants and society. We estimate the real internal rate of return for the Perry School program at 16 percent. “Real” indicates that the rate of return is adjusted for inflation. While program participants directly benefited from their increase in after-tax earnings and fringe benefits, these benefits were smaller than those gained by the general public. Based on present value estimates, about 80 percent of the benefits went to the general public (students were less disruptive in class and went on to commit fewer crimes), yielding over a 12 percent internal rate of return for society in general. Compared with other public investments, and even those in the private sector, an ECDP [Early Childhood Development Program] seems like a good buy.”*<sup>22</sup>

The Research and Policy Committee of the Committee for Economic Development recently released this policy statement:

*“The social equity arguments for preschool programs have recently been reinforced by compelling economic evidence which suggests that society at large benefits from investing in these programs. Broadening access to preschool programs for all children is a cost-effective investment that pays dividends for years to come and will help ensure our states’ and our nation’s future economic productivity.”*<sup>23</sup>

## Positive outcomes are contingent upon high-quality early education.

It is important to make the distinction between increased access to early education and increased access to *high-quality* early education. The positive outcomes from investments in early childhood development result when key attributes characterize early childhood programs.

The significance of quality is well-articulated by the Committee for Economic Development in its 2006 policy statement:

*Quality is paramount if preschool programs are to have an effect on children’s learning and provide the economic and financial benefits we expect from our investment. High-quality preschool is much more than custodial care; it provides children with meaningful learning and play experiences guided by qualified teachers in an enriched educational environment.”*<sup>24</sup>

### What makes an early childhood program a high-quality program?

In most fields and industries, human capital matters most in terms of delivery of a quality outcome or product. Early childhood education is no different in this regard. Features that have an impact on quality revolve largely around the teacher.

Effective teachers of four-year-old children have a sound background of education (usually displayed through an associate's, bachelor's or master's degree) and understanding of early childhood development, with specific training in early childhood education, fostering specialized early childhood competencies.

Effective teachers have the warmth and responsiveness to engage young children and develop positive relationships with them and to work in partnership with their families with a high degree of intercultural competency. They have strong communication skills that nurture

children's self-confidence and show sensitivity to children's holistic growth and development. They relate to children both individually and in small groups, cultivating curiosity by encouraging them to talk, welcoming questions, extending conversations, and allowing children to express their feelings. They expose children to a rich vocabulary and encourage exploration and experimentation.

An age-appropriate curriculum focusing on the holistic development of children and building upon their natural curiosity is significant, yet the way a teacher implements that curriculum – the way she utilizes that tool – is most important.

High quality programs also feature small class sizes and low child/teacher ratios that allow for individual student attention. Classes are broken into smaller activity-based centers, and learning environments are cognitively stimulating.

### PRESCHOOL: A GLOBAL AND NATIONAL LOOK

#### Early childhood education increasingly is seen as a public good in many countries.

Infrastructure and support for early childhood education are more advanced in many other countries, with growing recognition of the connection between a country's education system, beginning in early childhood, and economic growth.

In a recent issue brief from the New America Foundation, the author provides sobering comparisons between the United States and other countries:

- By fourth grade, America falls behind other countries in math achievement, including Singapore, Japan, Latvia, and the Russian Federation.
- While at least seven of ten students in Japan and Korea show proficiency in complex problem-solving skills, fewer than half of students in the United States performed at this level.
- European countries historically have provided three- to five-year olds with early childhood education, with enrollment at over 80 percent of children in this age range and per-child expenditures double those in the U.S.

- The Chinese are revisiting their pre-primary education system, moving from exam-based grades and memorization towards a curriculum focused on critical thinking and creativity, aiming to make three years of pre-primary school universally available in urban areas.
- India has determined to provide universal early childhood education to all three- to six-year olds by 2010.<sup>25</sup>

#### Europe:

Participation rates for three- to six-year-olds in early childhood education are 98 percent in Belgium and France; 95 percent in Italy; and 80-85 percent in Denmark, Sweden and Spain. Many European parents enjoy paid parental leave during the first year, as well as free or heavily subsidized care and education in subsequent years. Public policy is focused on both expanded access as well as increased quality. *"In some countries access to these programs is a legal right – at age one in most of the Nordic countries, at age two in France and age three in most of the other continental European Countries,"* stated Sheila Kamerman of Columbia University in her 2001 testimony to the United States Senate.<sup>26</sup>

### Japan:

More than 90 percent of children arrive at kindergarten having had some kind of preschool experience, either through three- to five-year-old kindergarten programs or certified day nurseries. While both programs are regulated by national standards, quality is varied; the dual system is complex, and there is a long waiting list for services. The cost is subsidized heavily by the government.

### China:

Preschool education in China has expanded within the context of overall education reform. Consider that before 1949, 80 percent of Chinese citizens were illiterate. With drastic attention to educational improvements, the illiteracy rate of young people has declined to less than seven percent. Educational reform, for the Chinese, includes early education:

*“The requisite conditions for the quality, equal access, and effectiveness of education are determined in early childhood; to pay great attention to the care and development of young children has great bearing on the realization of the goals of basic education,”* quoted from a Chinese document on educational reform.<sup>27</sup>

The proportion of three- to five-year-olds in China participating in early childhood education has increased from 29.9 percent in 1991 to 47 percent in 1997. The goal is to continue expansion until all urban and 70 percent of rural children have access to pre-primary education. China has put a particular emphasis on increasing teacher qualifications.

### More than 40 states provide state-funded preschool.

Across the country, 41 states and the District of Columbia provide some kind of state-funded preschool, serving about 20 percent of three- and four-year-olds in the nation. Of these, about 70 percent are in a school setting; Head Start programs, faith-based centers and child care centers are hosts to the remaining 30 percent.

Throughout the nation, state spending per child on preschool is approximately \$3,500, which is less than half the average amount for a student in the K-12 system. For the coming year, 23 governors from both sides of the aisle and the mayor of the District of Columbia have proposed an increase in pre-kindergarten funding by an average of 25 percent.<sup>28</sup>

### Expanding access requires both public and private provider participation.

Expanding access solely in public settings presents a number of challenges. The lack of facility space for additional classrooms is a growing problem in some school divisions struggling to keep pace with increasing numbers of students in the K-12 system. Finding appropriate classroom settings in the community can alleviate the facility demands faced by school divisions.

Additionally, expanding enrollment of four-year-olds in a state-funded program could pose a threat to early childhood programs that depend upon their four-year-old population to balance the costs of providing care for infants. Child care programs, like most care industries,

### Oklahoma: Voluntary Universal Access for all Four-Year-Olds

- Pilot for at-risk began 1980; in 1998, program expanded to encompass all four-year-olds.
- Serving 33,402 four-year-olds (65 percent) in 2005-06.
- Half are in full day; half in half-day programs. Classes provided in collaboration with public schools, Head Start, faith-based, community organizations.
- Sustained funding through the State Aid Formula at approximately \$6,300 per student.
- Teachers hold bachelor's degrees and are paid same as K-12 teachers with class size of 20.
- On average, test scores increased 16 percent after one year of participation, with greatest gains in cognitive and language skills.
- Low-income students improved test scores 26 percent.
- Hispanic students showed gains of 54 percent for half-day; 73 percent for full-day students.
- Pre-kindergarten students experienced 29 percent more growth in vocabulary; 44 percent more growth in math; 88 percent more growth in print awareness.



are expensive to operate because of the low provider-to-client ratio. While prohibitively expensive, infant care is in high demand. Many child care programs use the higher profit margin from serving four-year-olds to make it possible for them to provide care for infants. Removing the parent fees for four-year-olds from their receipts would seriously impact the bottom line for these small businesses.

### **Bright from the Start: Georgia's Preschool Program**

Georgia's universally accessible preschool program, initiated in 1993, is supported by state lottery revenues. The program serves approximately 70 percent of Georgia's four-year-olds.

Preschool classes are offered in public schools, private and nonprofit preschools, and Head Start programs. Teachers have either a Child Development Associate credential or a degree in early childhood education. In 2001, a study showed that more than 80 percent of children in Georgia's preschool program went on to rate average or better on third-grade readiness when compared to national norms.

While expanding access in a combination of public and private settings may be a more complex undertaking, this strategy has distinct advantages. By utilizing private centers to hold classrooms as part of the state-funded initiative, both challenges (facility space and the threat to small businesses) are mitigated. As well, parents are given a broader range of school readiness options and settings. While some preschool programs are only part day (or even considered full day, but ending in mid-afternoon), private providers have a greater ability to provide after-school care, affording a full day of coverage for working parents.

Finally, the public-private approach is strategic in that it requires systemic planning and allows for quality expansion and better transition practices across systems. Access to high-quality early learning settings at any age provides greater preparation for school readiness and successful outcomes. Rather than simply creating an additional competing program, a systemic approach may:

- increase and combine funding streams – state, federal, local and private,
- align administrative policies, governance and funding streams,
- create common frameworks to create a seamless continuum reducing fragmentation, and
- spur innovations that bridge the traditionally disparate care and education cultures.

### **Lessons from New York**

In a recent report entitled *A Diverse System Delivers for Pre-kindergarten: Lessons Learned in New York State*, the value as well as the challenges of administering pre-kindergarten programs in diverse settings are highlighted. Lessons learned in New York (where 60 percent of the 60,000 preschoolers enrolled are in non-public school settings) include:

- Setting a mandatory funding threshold for inclusion of community-based programs to ensure diverse delivery. It is hard to make serious collaboration happen unless it is required. Yet diverse delivery must have buy-in from school superintendents, principals and teachers. New York set its threshold at 10 percent, but now more than half of students attend pre-kindergarten classes in community sites.
- Building innovation, accountability and quality into collaboration. In New York, governance rests with the public education system but school districts were required to convene local advisory boards. Schools contract with community providers, but advisory boards make decisions on distribution, shape and content of services.
- Ensuring that community partners have resources equal to those of the public school pre-kindergarten programs in order to compete for qualified teachers and offer high-quality environments.<sup>29</sup>



### **A systemic approach enhances efficiency and effectiveness.**

In any state, focusing on an early childhood agenda and exploring the potential of a voluntary universal preschool program presents the challenge of merging two distinctly different and traditionally disparate systems. The care and education of very young children (aged birth to kindergarten) historically has been seen as the sole purview of the family. In the case of some low-income families, the government becomes part of the family support system in providing services and resources largely through departments of social services and related agencies.

As working parents of all socio-economic levels utilize varied forms of child care, state government plays a role – again through social services – by regulating some child care settings. Many child care accommodations that parents select, however, are unregulated, leaving those families in charge of their children's learning environment with little intervention or support from the state. The system of child care is fragmented and fragile, delivering wildly varied quality in services at a high cost to parents yet low profitability to owners. The education of children beginning in kindergarten, on the other hand, is seen largely as the purview of the state department of education through the formalized and highly regulated public school system.

States across the country have struggled with governance issues, seeking a system of preschool and early childhood education that allows for efficient and high-quality program management. Responsibility for early learning programs traditionally is fragmented: spread across agencies, funded with different resources, and delivered through a variety of public and private settings. States are responding to this challenge in a variety of ways, but most are moving to designation of an over arching entity to coordinate effectively the disparate elements; articulate and promote a clear unified vision of school readiness, implement a strategic policy agenda; build a coordinated infrastructure; ensure accountability; and maintain a focus on pre-kindergarten and young children. This over arching, organizing entity provides the governance structure needed to coordinate an effective, efficient program.

### **PRESCHOOL IN VIRGINIA**

#### **Virginia's preschool system is fragmented and inconsistent in quality.**

There are a variety of preschool programs serving many of the nearly 100,000 four-year-olds in Virginia. Public funds currently provide preschool for about a fourth of these children, who have been determined to be “at risk.” The rest of the children are in homes, varied child care settings, whether regulated or unregulated, and private preschools.

#### **State-funded Program:**

About 11 percent, or roughly 11,300 four-year-olds, receive a preschool experience through the state-funded Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI). The intention of the VPI program is to reduce disparities in educational achievement by serving those at-risk children not served by Head Start with a half- or full-day of preschool. Nearly all (90 of 92 programs) provide a full day, or six hours, of programming; only about 100 students receive a half day (or three hours) of preschool through VPI. Children in the program must be four years of age on or before September 30 of the school year.

#### **How is the number of “at risk” four-year-old children calculated?**

1. First, the estimated number of four-year-olds is calculated using the projected number of children under age five in each locality, reported by the Virginia Employment Commission.
2. That number is multiplied by the locality school division's free lunch eligibility percentage to derive an estimate of the number of at-risk four-year-olds in the school division.
3. The number of four-year-olds served by Head Start is subtracted from this number, leaving an estimate of the number of “unserved,” at-risk four-year-old children.

The program carries a cost of approximately \$5,700 per pupil (recently raised from \$5,400), shared by the state and local governments. By formula, the state's average share is \$3,135, though the number will vary depending upon participation rates; the local share is based on the community's composite index of ability to pay.

Launched by legislation in 1995 and administered through the Department of Education, funding for VPI has increased steadily over its eleven-year history, from \$10.3 million appropriated in 1995-96 to serve 30 percent of eligible children to \$49.6 million appropriated in 2006-07 to serve 100 percent of eligible children.

For the year 2005-06, 92 of 136 localities in Virginia participated in the VPI initiative; 25 eligible localities did not participate; 19 localities were ineligible for the program. Reasons for non-participation despite

eligibility include inability to make the local match (based on the community's composite index), dearth of facility space to hold the classrooms, or lack of critical mass of eligible students in a locality. Localities with no unserved, at-risk four-year-olds are not eligible.

In Virginia, while language in the Appropriation Act allows VPI to be offered in community settings, the vast majority of VPI classrooms are within public schools. Experience in other states shows that unless a percentage of private provider placements is mandated, pre-kindergarten programs will most likely land in the

### Universal Access in Some Virginia Localities

In a few areas of the Commonwealth, recognition of the benefits of having all four-year-olds attend preschool is so strong that local communities have developed systems to make preschool available to all four-year-olds whose parents wish for them to attend. Following are highlights from such a program in Clarke County.

Clarke County's preschool program is small – only 55 four-year-olds, but it is universal in the sense that all parents who want preschool access for their children can get it. The division is creative in combining Title I, Head Start, VPI, CSA funds, local funds and parent-paid tuition to provide universal access. Parents pay tuition for students in a reverse-mainstreaming program. This very popular program pairs advanced preschoolers with special education children in the morning, where the advanced students serve as mentors and role models for the other children. The program provides an enriched "early kindergarten" program for the advanced preschoolers in the afternoon.

Clarke utilizes an innovative staffing model, with two highly skilled lead teachers, and three full-time and three half-time instructional assistants. This allows more individualized attention for students at the same cost as the standard staffing model used by most preschool programs. The lead teachers are licensed and have at least four-year degrees. The instructional assistants do not have four-year degrees – they are "highly qualified" under NCLB rules for assistants (e.g. have two-year degrees or pass an assessment) and receive extensive training.

The instructional assistants assume significant responsibility for components of the preschool program, unlike teaching assistants in some other settings. Children rotate through all personnel in shifting groups throughout the day, rather than being assigned as one class to one teacher/assistant pair. For example, one group of students will work on literacy with one teacher while another group works on gross motor skills with an assistant and a third works on art with another assistant. Later the children will be in groups with different children and different teachers.

A Reading Academy involves placing kids throughout the P-2 school to reading-level groups. Advanced preschoolers may be reading with first and second-graders. Grade boundaries are ignored.

The staff reports that at the end of second grade, 96 percent of children are reading at or above grade level, and 85 percent of those students are reading at least one grade level higher. The staff also reports that Clarke has one of the lowest rates of special education enrollment in the state, and they attribute that largely to the preschool program.

The schools have excellent relations with private child care provider, and believe an excellent model for working with private providers should include funding and an institutional structure for school personnel to assess the providers and help support their skills.

schools. This arrangement is simpler and more familiar for school administrators, and there is the perception that schools can provide a higher quality experience than other providers. In the absence of clear models illustrating delivery of pre-kindergarten in private settings, and the assurance of consistent standards of quality, school administrators default to advocating the traditional model.

In 2005, Virginia met only four of 10 quality benchmarks for its preschool programs, according to the 2005 State Preschool Yearbook, an annual report produced by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).<sup>30</sup> The benchmarks achieved in the Commonwealth include the requirement that VPI teachers have specialization in preschool education through licensure. Virginia exceeds the benchmarks encouraging class size of 20 or lower and staff-child ratio of 1:10 or better, and meets the requirement to provide vision, hearing and health screenings.

The six quality standards not achieved in Virginia include the utilization of early learning standards that are comprehensive of the domains of a child's development; the requirement of a bachelor's degree for teachers (though nearly all VPI teachers have this degree); the requirement of at least a CDA for assistant teachers; at least 15 hours per year of teacher in-service training; at least one meal a day; and monitoring of quality standards.

## Federally-Funded Programs

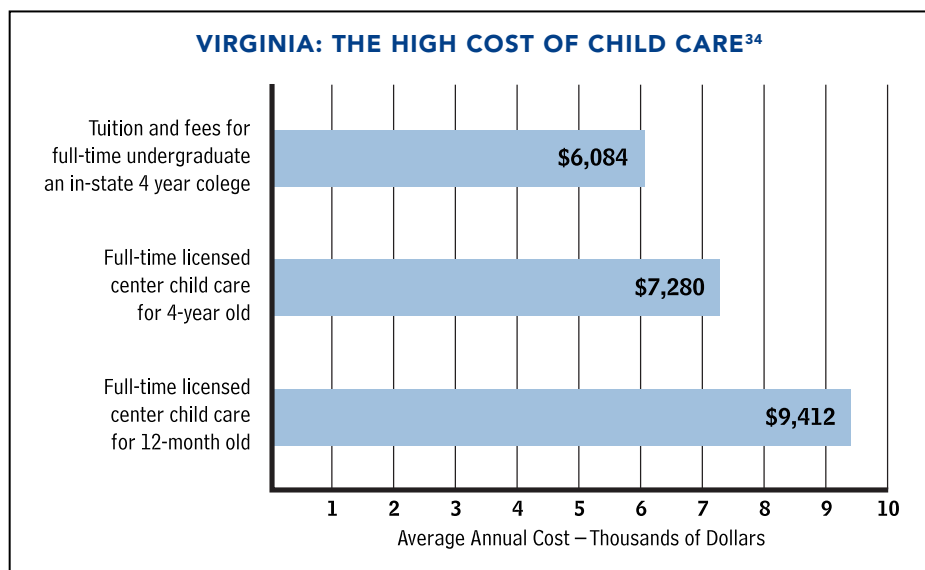
While federally appropriated, Title I funds are administered through the Virginia Department of Education. The Title I program seeks to improve the teaching and learning of elementary and secondary education students in high-poverty schools. While there is no particular designation or separate reporting for preschool students, Title I-funded schools and school divisions may use Title I funds for preschool services for at-risk children in their schools. This year, 45 local school divisions applied for Title I funds to serve approximately 4,419 preschoolers. Thirty-nine of these divisions report a collaborative effort with VPI; 31 with other pre-schools; and 31 with Head Start.<sup>31</sup>

Virginia's public school divisions may apply for federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) funds from the Virginia Department of Education. Part B, Section 619 of the IDEA provides preschool funding for children aged three through five needing special education and related services. In 2005-06, 17,460 children aged three through five with disabilities were served. Allocated funding for 2006-07 is \$8.7 million.

The federally-funded Head Start program serves approximately nine percent of the four-year-olds in Virginia (roughly 9,800 children) with comprehensive preschool services. With nearly \$100 million in federal funds, Head Start directly funds 54 local programs in Virginia. These "grantees" serve children aged three to five who meet the income criteria of up to 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. Each program is allowed to use up to 10 percent of its enrollment for students whose families are above income criteria but who qualify because of a disability.

## Challenges of Integrating Existing Programs

The federal Head Start program, which serves families and children up to 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) with not only early learning but comprehensive family support services, traditionally is viewed as part of the family-social services culture rather than the formal education system. While some Head Start programs are within public school systems, others are in community action agencies or community-based organizations. Because Head Start serves children who come with a broad range of risk factors, not the least of which is pervasive poverty, and because the program provides an array of services to the child and the family, it is seen more as a social service than a program of education. VPI, on the other hand, is a product of the public school, and traditionally serves children with greater advantages who are still at risk (generally 100-130 percent FPL) primarily with an academic program. In many communities, there is strong coordination and collaboration between these programs. However, in some school districts, parents have been allowed to choose the state-funded program over the federally-funded program, which has caused the Head Start community to "lose children" and in extreme cases, to return unused federal funds. These factors have bred, in some communities, an atmosphere that challenges smooth collaboration and integration of Head Start and VPI.



Public funding also is provided for preschoolers in the form of subsidies for child care services. In Virginia, 7,726 four-year-olds receive subsidized care.<sup>32</sup> While funding for subsidies has increased over the years, following the trend of the growing number of children whose parents are working, federal funding covers only seven percent of eligible children in Virginia. The average monthly subsidy payment in FY 2006 was \$667 per family and \$391 per child; the average monthly cost of child care in Virginia is \$724 for an infant (depending upon setting) and \$560 per preschooler.<sup>33</sup> Working parents at low and middle-income levels struggle to afford the high cost of child care.

### Private Child Care and Preschools

Beyond the publicly funded programs, there is a wide range of settings in which young children spend their days. The quality of those experiences is as broad as the variety of settings.

Before kindergarten, children may be at home with a parent or other caregiver, in some form of licensed child care such as a private center or in a family day home, in unlicensed care including faith-based centers and informal arrangements (sometimes called family, friend, and neighbor care) or in private preschools.

Virginia's Department of Social Services (VDSS) licenses child day centers (except those exempted by law), family day homes and short-term child day centers (such as summer camps). Child day centers must be licensed unless exempted under *Section 63.2-1715* of the *Code of Virginia*. Licensed programs must meet standards set by the Child Day-Care Council, enforced by VDSS through inspections occurring at least twice a year and investigation of any complaints.

A family day home provides care for six to 12 children (excluding provider's children) in a residence. Family

day home care is the most common form of child care in this country, especially for younger children. Parents may choose family child care for its intimate, home-like setting, flexible hours, consistency of care-giver and small group size.

Unlicensed child care includes child care that is not required by law to be registered or certified. This type of child care includes religious exempt child day centers, voluntarily registered family day homes and certified preschools.

While it is difficult to estimate the number of four-year-old children in each of these types of settings, we know that, in Virginia, at least 62 percent of children under six have all parents working, implying a great need for non-parental care.<sup>35</sup> The National Child Care Association sponsored a study in 2002 that found that 60 percent of working families with children under five paid for licensed or informal child care.<sup>36</sup> The 2002 National Survey of America's Families indicated that 82 percent of children aged three and four with employed mothers are in some form of non-parental care.<sup>37</sup> Further, in an economic study of the child care industry in Virginia released in 2004, it was estimated that 51 percent of preschoolers in care are in licensed centers, religious centers, or family providers.<sup>38</sup> While 80 percent of child care establishments in the Commonwealth are home-based family child care businesses (licensed or unlicensed), the majority of young children can be found in licensed child care centers.

The quality of child care in Virginia is inconsistent. Some programs provide excellent care in exceptional facilities; many are at the other end of the spectrum. Licensing requirements are minimal, establishing mostly baseline health and safety standards for the protection of children, resulting in little incentive for provision of quality features.

### The Early Childhood Education Program Dilemma

As children develop skills along a continuum, forming the foundation for all future learning and capabilities, it is essential that teachers of young children have the knowledge areas, competencies and communication skills to facilitate effectively the acquisition of skills. As a specialty, teaching a four-year-old is distinctly different from teaching an eight-year-old and requires coursework emphasizing skills and approaches specific to the developmental level of students. The growing number of children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and with disabilities and special needs demands that teachers possess strong skills in meeting a diverse array of needs and developmental ability.

Professional development and access to professional career pathways must be addressed to ensure a strong, effective workforce of preschool teachers. Currently, several obstacles stand in the way of a smooth, efficient professional development system in Virginia.

There is a dearth of early childhood education programs in Virginia's four-year colleges and universities. As budgets have been trimmed, early childhood programs have been cut from some universities, stifling the ability of early childhood professionals to seek higher degrees and diminishing the pool of qualified teachers in that region of the Commonwealth.

Because there is a cap on the number of child development courses allowed in teacher licensure programs, credits at the bachelor degree level are often limited to student teaching placements rather than coursework focused on early childhood content. Teachers do not receive the necessary training to build foundations for the success of very young children.

At present, the degree with the richest content for the specific competencies mentioned above is the Associate of Applied Science at community colleges. The degree, however, is not considered a "transfer degree," which means that if a teacher with this degree chooses to enroll in a baccalaureate program, the courses would not likely transfer to a four-year institution. Another challenge with the current system is the inconsistency of coursework from one community college to another, further complicating the transferability of credits from one college to another.

Ideally, licensure requirements will be modified to permit more early childhood education content in programs, and the Commonwealth will have a professional development system characterized by a unified articulation system and affordable, continuous professional development for teachers at all levels to advance in higher education without losing credits or repeating content previously mastered.

### Studies show strong outcomes from Virginia preschool programs when quality is present.

While there has been no statewide evaluation or tracking of outcomes from the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), local school divisions have documented strong results from their preschool programs.

An Arlington County 2001-2002 study showed that VPI students scored higher on the PALS assessment (a kindergarten instrument demonstrating reading readiness) than students with no preschool experience, with 87.5 percent of students who attended one of Arlington County's preschool programs meeting the PALS benchmarks, as compared to the 57.4 percent pass rate for those with no preschool experience. In the group of children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches, preschool program attendees met their benchmarks at the rate of 84.4 percent while only 47.5 percent of children with no preschool experience met the

benchmarks. While the overall average of VPI children meeting PALS-K benchmarks was 79.6 percent, 100 percent of black VPI students met the standard.

An evaluation of pre-kindergarten offered by the Norfolk Public Schools achieved impressive results:

- Over 75 percent of the four-year old students participating in pre-kindergarten exceeded the performance criterion in all areas of the COR (Child Observation Record), designed to measure the High/Scope curriculum performance objectives, with performance in 2003-04 surpassing former years.
- Over 90 percent of the pre-kindergarten students in these 33 schools achieved the end-of-year PALS benchmark range, with an increase of 33.9 points during the year, from a mean of 53.8 in the Fall to 87.7 in the Spring. (A summed score of 56 on the PALS-PreK is correlated with kindergarten achievement.)



- The 1999-00 pre-kindergarten students had a passing rate of 66.9 percent in English-Writing and 84 percent in Mathematics on 3rd grade SOL tests, exceeding the district percent passing rates in both areas.
- SOL passing rates in 2002 and 2004 by former pre-kindergarten students began closing the achievement gap between Black and White subgroups, with reductions in that gap by 2.7 percent in English and 5.5 percent in Math.

An evaluation of the Bright Beginnings Program in Williamsburg-James City County in 2003, which is

modeled after the Perry Preschool Project, showed that at-risk students who participated in this program had third grade reading and math scores equivalent to other third grade students. Eighty three percent of the former Bright Beginnings students were reading on or above grade level by the end of the third grade year; only three required special education services; only two were retained; and 13 required reading intervention. In this model, the teachers are fully licensed, most have master's degrees with more than five years of experience in early education and the mean salary is \$43,308 per year.

### The Alignment Project

Children grow and develop along a continuum in multi-faceted ways in the first few years of life, whether they are at home or in some form of child care or preschool setting – public or private. From home to child care setting to preschool and into elementary school, transitions from one learning environment to another may be facilitated by adults' understanding of child development from birth to kindergarten across settings. Parents, providers, and teachers have the opportunity and responsibility to form a seamless network supporting the continuum of children's growth and development.

Traditionally, care and education of children in the first few years have been viewed as the responsibility solely of parents and families. As more parents have entered the workforce, families have sought safe, nurturing environments for their children while they work. Child care, whether through a licensed facility, a faith-based setting, or days spent in a neighbor's care, has been viewed as the realm of social services.

Once the child nears five years of age, the formal education system becomes the primary "keeper" of children's learning hours. Through the lens of tradition, these two "institutions" of private child care and public school have distinctly different cultures that have proven difficult to bridge.

The Alignment Project seeks to build a bridge spanning the gap between the private child care community and public schools. By developing frameworks and tools that create consistent guidelines, standards and program assessment to connect the settings, the

Alignment Project is facilitating the seamless continuum of care and education for young children.

Products of the Alignment Project include:

1. A set of early learning benchmarks for children from birth to kindergarten articulates the continuum of skill development from infancy through toddlerhood to preschool age. The benchmarks show indicators of each skill, paired with examples of ways the child might display the skill, along with strategies an adult or teacher might use to support acquisition of that skill.
2. A set of professional competencies that defines the knowledge areas, competencies, and abilities early childhood educators need to effectively support a child's optimal growth and development.
3. Competencies are paired with a career lattice that provides a clear professional development path for those early childhood educators wishing to improve their skills and competencies.
4. A framework of program standards that clearly articulate the features necessary for a high-quality learning program, regardless of the setting.
5. A design for Virginia's Quality Ratings System as a market-based approach to assess and encourage quality in early learning programs.

*It should be noted that preschool does not necessarily ensure future success. High quality preschool and preparation must be complemented by a continuum of high quality education experiences in the existing K-12 system so that gains are not lost, but rather supported and continued.*



## A Quality Ratings System encourages quality and consistency.

A key component of successful implementation in diverse settings is ensuring that quality is consistent across settings, ensuring that the delivery of school readiness services meets the goal of increased student achievement and positive outcomes.

Development and implementation of a quality ratings system (QRS) offers a strategic solution. This market-based strategy is an effective way not only to facilitate the desired quality consistency, but also to encourage a seamless continuum of care and education throughout provider settings that is optimal for the successful development of “school ready” children. An intensive initiative called the Alignment Project is working to develop a sensible design for a QRS to meet the needs of the Commonwealth.

A quality ratings system is a means of assessing and rating the quality of an early childhood program, whether in a child care or preschool setting, public or private. Varied features of quality are factored into the rating, including level of education of teachers and aides, physical environment of the classroom, materials and resources, management practices and the quality of interaction between the teacher and child.

The rating is then displayed – often as a five-star scale. For those programs that voluntarily participate in the QRS – no matter where they are on the scale, a mentor/coach helps them develop a quality improvement plan and provides the technical assistance to help them on this path. As programs achieve the next quality level, incentives may be awarded.

There are many benefits to a voluntary quality ratings system:

- It is a strong consumer education tool for parents, an at-a-glance way to recognize the level of quality a program offers.
- It serves as an effective marketing tool for programs to promote their high quality services.
- QRS is a means of getting many programs in diverse settings on a quality improvement path, and establishes a structure for incentives targeted to quality.
- It is a market-based approach that avoids the regulatory discussions that have not been productive in terms of impacting quality.
- Of most significance in this discussion, QRS provides a strategic method to determine which early education programs (public or private) may be eligible to hold Start Strong pre-kindergarten classes.

## THE START STRONG INITIATIVE

### The Council presents its initial recommendations to Governor Kaine:

*1. Provide a coordinating infrastructure to address the research-based quality features that result in outcomes and gains for early learners.*

- A. Adopt a voluntary quality ratings system (QRS) that is consistent for both public and private preschool programs. Based on Alignment Project products, the QRS should address program quality standards, staff qualifications, classroom interactions, curriculum, physical environment and program management and provide mechanisms for quality assessment, monitoring, program evaluation and reporting for all state-supported programs.

Determining the quality criteria for Virginia’s preschool program provides the opportunity to define and create optimal learning environments. Since standards set the bar for quality and consistency, discerning the appropriate standards – for example, teacher qualifications, class size, teacher to pupil ratios and curriculum choices – is an essential task. The standards identified will determine to a large extent whether or not the program will have the ability to deliver the desired outcomes in student gains. The Council has affirmed the importance of utilizing the work of the Alignment Project to institute a set of program standards that is consistent across both public and private settings. A key strategy will be the adoption of a quality ratings system for preschool programs.

- B. Build a high-quality preschool workforce by working with the Department of Education, Department of Social Services, community colleges, four-year colleges and other professional development providers to create appropriate education and training programs aligned with competencies, professional development lattice and licensure/certification requirements.

The most critical component for implementing the new preschool initiative will be recruiting and retaining a corps of effective teachers. As in most industries, human capital and the quality of the workforce are keys to success. Teaching four-year-old children in effective and engaging ways requires knowledge, competencies and skills that are distinctive. Teaching a four-year-old is different from teaching an eight-year-old. The Council is committed to considering the development and recruitment of a workforce that demonstrates the special ability to teach very young children.

One of the most pivotal decisions regarding professional development will involve degree requirements. Ideally, teachers would show a level of higher education attainment through an associate's or bachelor's degree in early childhood education or development, along with specific coursework and training (sometimes in the form of licensure or certification) in early childhood education.

Many states have surmised that high-quality early education programs require teachers with bachelors degrees. Some argue alternatively that coursework specifically focused on early childhood education, usually attained at a community college, is more highly correlated to effective teaching and is a more attainable goal for child care teachers, who are typically paid a lower salary than public school teachers.

As decisions are made regarding degree requirements, a strong professional development system must be in place to support an effective workforce. In Virginia, this need will necessitate expanded access to early childhood education programs at four-year colleges and universities, a more seamless system of articulation between two- and four-year institutions, more finely-tuned and consistent coursework at community colleges and a sharper focus on preschool competencies in licensure requirements. The professional competencies articulated through the Alignment Project will serve as the basis for training and coursework planning, focused on optimal professional skills development.

## *2. Collect and use data and information to guide Start Strong decision-making.*

- C. Direct Governor's Working Group to collect and analyze retrospective data from local school divisions and private providers on outcomes from existing preschool programs. Data collection should include information about program characteristics, student characteristics, student achievement in preschool and student achievement in early elementary years. Support information systems to track data collection and reporting on programs, program quality and outcomes prospectively.
- D. Consider the costs and benefits of commissioning a survey of a representative sample of families in Virginia to develop an accurate picture of the current placement of young children in care settings and the need for additional preschool services.

## *3. Examine and strengthen existing programs as a foundation from which to build.*

- E. Identify all public funding streams supporting early childhood education and care, and training for providers (including scholarship programs). Recommend ways to improve utilization of existing funds in coordinated systems for delivery and tracking of direct services and professional development.
- F. Coordinate recruitment and registration policies and practices for existing public (and on a voluntary basis, private) preschool programs to facilitate greater integration and ensure that utilization of public dollars is maximized. For example, create a single point of entry for multiple preschool programs in a locality. Support local council capacity to facilitate collaboration.

The Council recognizes the need to promote, at both the state level and through local community planning, coordination of recruitment and registration policies and practices for VPI, Head Start and other programs to maximize existing programs and funding streams. The Governor's Working Group will take this responsibility, in addition to pursuing other strategies that improve the efficiency of programming and increase the capacity for serving four-year-olds.

## *4. Identify or create governance structure at both the local and state levels.*

- G. Utilize the new Governor's Working Group as the central coordinating body for early childhood programs at the state level and encourage top-level participation from cabinet secretaries and agency heads. Provide funds and technical assistance to support the development of local planning councils mirroring the state-level working group. Develop grant process for local initiatives to apply for funding and specify what agencies or organizations might qualify as lead and/or fiscal agent at local level.

A state-level entity is needed to coordinate and provide oversight for the preschool program; because of the logistics of the mixed delivery system, the logical entity would be an entity bridging the Department of Education and Department of Social Services. The Council recommends that the existing Governor's Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives, housed in the Secretary of Education's office, serve that function initially.

In Executive Order #7 creating the Start Strong Council, Governor Kaine announced his intention that grants would be awarded to local Start Strong councils, giving them responsibility and flexibility to make determinations about the preschool initiative in their own communities. Just as the Working Group consists of a diverse group of key partners, local communities would be encouraged to mirror this composition in their planning groups. The new Virginia Early Childhood Foundation may be able to play a key role in fostering the development of these local partnerships through its grants program and related technical assistance activities.

In addition, the Council will recommend specific strategies for a grant process for local planning groups to apply for funding, as well as local decision-making for identifying what agency or organization will be the lead

and/or fiscal agent at the local level. The Council will emphasize mechanisms to facilitate delivery in diverse settings.

H. Address in pilot programs the following: quality ratings system; blending of programs with different funding streams; delivery in mixed (public and private) sites; expansion of eligibility using various individual or community risk criteria; coordinating pre-kindergarten in schools and private sites with after-school care in private sites; course/program development, teacher training and ways to increase throughput, perhaps by partnering with private providers; funding for local councils to allocate within a range of specified priorities and quality requirements.

### Proposed Pilot

The Council has approved a pilot concept to begin in the fall of 2007 which will provide an opportunity to test a number of proposed program features: development and use of local planning councils; quality ratings system for selection of participating programs and program standard consistency; utilization of diverse settings for delivery; braiding of funding streams to provide options for parents and access for more children; a plan for professional development and mentoring; data collection and evaluation and methodology for expanding access to additional children.

- Six communities will be identified and selected, using various factors including strength and commitment of local planning council leadership and presence of high quality provider settings. Communities will include examples in both urban and rural settings; selection will include a consideration of geographic diversity and local demographics.
- Working with local planning councils and utilizing the quality ratings system, existing settings (including or blending public schools, Head Start programs, private child care centers, and faith-based settings) will be identified to increase access to 1,000 additional four-year-old students not currently served by public funds.

- Options for provision of full-day coverage for working parents will be emphasized.
- Additional funds will be provided, but local planning councils and providers will be encouraged to be innovative in braiding funding streams within existing settings for greatest maximization of resources.
- Through the use of the quality ratings system, participating programs and teachers will meet or exceed quality requirements equivalent to four stars on the five-star scale, as determined by the recommendations of the Council.
- Teachers will be supported with mentoring and coaching as part of their ongoing professional development requirements.
- Through the piloting of the Quality Ratings System, additional early childhood programs will be identified that are working to achieve four- or five-star status in order to be eligible for the state preschool program. The pilot will provide the opportunity to highlight programs as they achieve increased quality for a higher rating and eligibility to participate in the initiative, reflecting a community wide focus on quality improvement.

## CONCLUSION

The Start Strong Council finds that increasing investment in early childhood education through expanded access to high quality preschool for four-year-olds holds the potential for desirable returns including greater school readiness, higher school achievement, and stronger employment opportunities, resulting in impressive benefits for the Commonwealth.

*The Council and task forces will continue their work over the next year, providing a final report and recommendations to the Governor by October 2007.*



For additional copies, visit [www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/StartStrong/index.cfm](http://www.education.virginia.gov/Initiatives/StartStrong/index.cfm).

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